News and Information

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Weekly Column by David McCollum, Director
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Avoiding Travel Burn

The unusually bitter cold of last December has given way to the more traditional winter rain and slush that makes a lot of people wish for a sun-soaked shore in Rio de Janeiro. If you are one of those people, unpack the tips in this column before you settle into your travel plans. Like sunscreen, they can help keep you from getting burned.

Travel packages can cost thousands of dollars, so treat them with the same level of scrutiny you would any major purchase. Shop around, and try to buy your travel package from a business you know. If you are not familiar with a company, investigate it with the Division of Consumer Affairs or contact professional associations such as the American Society of Travel Agents, the National Tour Association, or the United States Tour Operators Association.

Make sure that you understand the details of your package and verify all arrangements with your travel agent before you pay. Get the specific names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the hotels, airlines, and cruise ships you'll be using. Call those businesses to verify your reservations. Be certain you understand the rules and penalties for cancellations.

You should also learn the secret language of travel advertising. A "luxury" hotel in a "quaint" Mexican village may remind you of your grandfather's barn in the boonies. An "ocean view" on an "island cruise" can turn out to be a spot next to the rail on a ferry circling sandbars all day. Get specifics in plain English from consumers who have already made the trip.

It's best to use a credit card to make your purchase. If the trip is not what you were promised, you may be able to dispute the charges through your credit card company. Be wary of any company that asks for cash, and if you choose to pay by check, make it payable

to an escrow account. Legitimate companies will provide you with escrow bank information.